

Article

Perspectives on Inclusive Education: Need for Muslim Children's Literature

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Abstract: Muslim students and communities in Western sociopolitical and educational contexts confront substantive challenges of racisms, Islamophobia, and under- and misrepresentations in media as well as in literature. Creating a robust repertoire of curricular resources for teaching and learning, teacher development programs, and schooling in general offers a promise of developing classroom practices, which in turn promotes an inclusive discourse that recognizes the unique position and presence of a Muslim child. The present article examines the prospects of developing such a curriculum called Muslim Children's Literature for inclusive schooling and teacher development programs in the context of public education in Ontario, Canada. It is situated in the larger umbrella of creating specific theory and methodology for education that lend exposure to Muslim cultures and civilizations. Development of such a literature as curricular resources addresses the questions of Muslim identities through curriculum perceptions so as to initiate critical conversations around various educational challenges that the development and dissemination of Muslim curricular resources faces today. I make a case for developing Muslim Children's Literature to combat the challenges of having limited repertoire to engage with Muslim students in public schools and teacher candidates in teacher development programs. With the description of the necessity of such a literature, this article outlines characteristics of the proposed genre of Muslim Children's Literature, as well as the unique position of a Muslim child in the current educational scenarios. A brief peek into select fiction on Muslim themes available in English internationally that can be used as curricular resources at elementary and secondary level serves towards reinforcing the definition of Muslim Children's Literature. Further, these offer a sample that may be promoted under the proposed genre of Muslim Children's Literature.

Keywords: inclusive education; Islamic education; Islamophobia; Muslim child; Muslim Children's Literature; teacher development; curriculum development

Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again and that is what they become . . . a single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story . . . It robs people of dignity.

The Danger of a Single Story ([Adichie 2009](#))

1. Introduction

Situated in the context of multiple challenges and possibilities faced by Muslim students and communities in the global, specifically the Western, sociopolitical and educational contexts, this article examines prospects of curriculum development in the context of public education in Ontario,

Canada. In particular, the article makes a case for the necessity of developing Muslim children's¹ literature² as a curriculum resource for diverse Canadian classrooms, where Muslim students have a noteworthy presence.

Muslim Children's Literature can be understood as a literary corpus that has fictional and imaginary expressions related to Muslim children, their cultures, civilizations, beliefs, and practices. The development and use of Muslim Children's Literature, especially relevant to students of elementary and secondary school age, is crucial to combat the challenges of Muslim youth identity: racisms, misrepresentations, underrepresentation and stereotyping of Muslim characters in general literature and curricular sources, projections of Islam as monolithic, as well as Islamophobia, to name just a few. The issue of enrichment of curriculum resources at elementary and secondary school level through the representations of Muslim cultures and societies touches several chords within curriculum studies, teacher development, and inclusive education (<https://inclusiveeducation.ca/about/what-is-ie/>).

Developing Muslim Children's Literature involves nurturing Muslim perspectives in the school curriculum to make it more inclusive, holistic, authentic, credible, multicultural, and pluralistic. In addition, it holds the promise of promoting critical engagement of Muslim children in Ontario classrooms, as well as equipping teachers with significant knowledge for such an engagement to combat racisms and Islamophobia³ (Van Driel 1992).

In the sections below, I present the rationale, methodology, and positionality, followed by the description of need and characteristics of Muslim Children's Literature. A brief insight into the select available fiction that can be expended and classified as Muslim Children's Literature is also provided. These materials can also be used as tools for relevant teacher development programs. In 'Way Forward', I suggest ways to include Muslim Children's Literature in curriculum and teacher development efforts.

2. Rationale

The need for and relevant recommendations related to the development of Muslim curricular resources is based on my PhD research (Panjwani 2017). In that study, curriculum perceptions pertaining to Muslim Children's Literature were explored through a study of the Ontario curriculum and beyond. Some of these insights were: the near absence of customized curriculum resources, particularly in English language, for elementary and secondary students; Islamophobia and stereotyping of Muslims in different media and literary sources; the negligible presence of Muslim content or characters in educational literature and in print, as well as electronic media in general; misrepresentations and underrepresentation of Muslims in relevant literature; shortage of authors writing Muslim stories; little literacy and reading culture amongst immigrant Muslims; lack of publishers coming forward to publish Muslim content; and not enough recognition of Muslim Children's Literature, as well as Muslim authors worldwide. Significantly, the diversity within the *Ummah*, the Muslim community worldwide, is not arrested adequately, which is also a cause for having monolithic and stereotypical depictions of Muslims and Islam. Notably, literature for and by the children chiefly in English does not have a lot of presence in the history and tradition of Islam.

While making a case for the development and inclusion of Muslim Children's Literature, it is important to take note of the concerns that the secularists may have to such a proposition. Both religion and secularism are variable social categories (Scott 2017). Secularists represent ideals that avoid taking a stand on questions of religion. Iain Benson (2000) proposes a typology that has an "inclusive secular" framework to positively engage with the tension between the religious and the secular. In the context of Ontario, there are publicly run Christian schools, a scenario that can augment dialogue on the relationship between the secular and religious in public education. Within this complexity

¹ The term children here is inclusive of teenagers and young adults covering the expanse of primary and secondary students.

² Muslim Children's Literature as a proposed category/genre has been capitalised in the present paper.

³ Islamophobia is indiscriminate negative racist attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims (Bleich 2011).

can also be located the controversial case of Valley Park Middle School in Toronto, which provides space for Muslim students for Friday prayers under the supervision of an imam (Buckingham 2012). Literature talks of the universal human condition and can provide neutral grounds in the classroom to discuss secular ideals in an inclusive classroom environment. Muslim Children's Literature can be juxtaposed with several similar secular resources freely available and recommended in the state curriculum. Significantly, multiculturalism is a secularist agenda, and Muslim Children's Literature can be accommodated in this category.

3. Methodology and Positionality

I attempt to answer the following question in this article: How can language arts curricular sources in Ontario be enriched to include narratives of Muslim children from different Muslim cultures and societies in order to combat racisms and Islamophobia?

Within this larger query, the following sub-themes are addressed:

1. Why the need for Muslim Children's Literature?
2. What is Muslim Children's Literature?
3. What are some of the available sources in English that can illustrate the genre and prospects of Muslim Children's Literature as a curricular resource?

In order to make arguments and recommendations for prospects of advancing Muslim Children's Literature, qualitative content analysis using the method of critical content analysis is attempted, keeping the frameworks of critical pedagogy, postcolonialism, and orientalism in mind to depict patterns of representations of Muslim characters. These frameworks are used to think within, through, and beyond the texts analyzed to illustrate the subject of the proposed genre of Muslim Children's Literature. Methodological procedures of descriptive analysis of the two artifacts in Section 5 bring out ways of Muslim presentations. The sociohistorical and cultural tropes related to representations are indicators of identity markers.

I use critical content (Johnson et al. 2017) and discourse analysis (Gee 2011) to make recommendations for the development of Muslim Children's Literature. The 'critical' in critical content analysis helps understand procedures for locating power in social practices by understanding, uncovering, and transforming conditions of inequality (Johnson et al. 2017; Raina 2009). Critical content analysis of children's literature does not focus as much on the literary qualities of the text to see what authors have done in the text; instead, the text is considered from theoretical perspectives of sociohistorical, gender, cultural, or thematic stances. Discourse analysis dissects intertextuality within the texts to understand how meaning is created through different representations. Together, these two methods aim to make readers agents of the texts rather than victims. They help in creating awareness around systems of meanings that operate within the text and connect them with larger themes as well as research questions. For instance, Beach et al. (2009) have analyzed *The Day of Ahmed's Secret* (Heide and Gilliland 1990) through different theoretical lenses of post-coloniality and inquiry-based interpretative reading. The postcolonial reading of the text brings out stereotypical and exotic images of the little boy, Ahmed. Such analyses help understand how space, as well as personal and cultural identities, are negotiated. It also highlights how representations of others are distorted by dominant cultures. My own knowledge as a Muslim teacher, my background, my position, my experiences from the East and the West, and finally my situatedness as a Muslim minority woman play a critical role in this analytical practice. Together, these strands warrant a holistic engagement with expressions of Islam complicated by historical forces of colonialism, orientalism, and globalization. They also delve deep into textual and visual elements of children's literature.

The data resources that I used for my research comprise of archives, library data on Muslims, available multicultural children's literature, and Ontario curriculum recommendations. I browsed through the Trillium List (<http://www.trilliumlist.ca/>) to see Muslim content in the recommended

curriculum. Since my research focus is on the contemporary fiction, I looked for these more consciously to find those fictional pieces that are readily available and have the potential to become classroom materials.

3.1. Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

As mentioned above, critical pedagogy is used as part of critical content analysis to evoke questions of under- and misrepresentations of Muslim children. Appreciation of postcolonial imaginations (Kanu 2003) such as globalization, subalternity, critical ontology, to name a few, that challenge, interrogate, and deconstruct the dominance of Western cultural knowledge in curriculum design, as well as an examination of relations between Islam and the West through Orientalist approaches (Said 2003), highlight the limitations of Orientalist representations, for instance, essentializing the depiction of Muslim women as wearing hijab. These lenses also guide the process to contest the monolithic image of Islam. Teacher empowerment rooted in critical pedagogy (Ellsworth 1989; Freire 2006; Giroux 1981, 1983; Kincheloe 2004; Leonardo 2002) that investigates, explores, and discusses school-based issues, local politics, issues in the media, and/or injustices breaks the culture of silence among the oppressed. Teacher development entrenched in critical pedagogy and the prospect of the development of a subaltern genre of Muslim Children's Literature both have the power to be antidotes to the stories of dominant groups. They are also a call to informed action.

According to Gordon L. Porter (2018), inclusive education implies that all students attend and are welcomed in their neighborhood school. The focus of inclusive school is on implementing practices and supports for students and teachers. Inclusive education is reinforced by initiatives targeting school improvement and instructional effectiveness. Further, inclusion fosters a school culture of respect and belonging, as well as providing opportunities to learn about and accept individual differences. Finally, an inclusive school helps the community appreciate diversity and inclusion. The paradigm of inclusion is also a model of hope and possibilities (Aga 2008).

3.2. Positionality

As a minority Muslim woman, I am always challenged by Muslim identities continuously depicted and created around me. This, coupled with my search for an authentic self-expression in the quagmire of multiple subjectivities such as my colonial upbringing in a convent of Jesus and Mary in the Mughal capital of India, my belief in fairy tales from my childhood, and my teaching profession, drives me to delve deeper into aspects of Muslimness and how these are depicted within children's literature. My curiosity about the subject is also related to my childhood memories of books and readings that have contributed to the formation of my inner psyche and paradigms, which both haunt and enrich me.

In this context, I maintain that the development of a specific genre of Muslim Children's Literature has the capacity to strengthen student and teacher engagement, as well as create a robust repertoire of inclusive curriculum in Canada. It will also substantively support teacher development efforts. Additionally, such a literature can serve other faith-based teacher education programs, particularly the Jewish and the Christian (Memon 2011). These faith communities are part of *Ahl-al kitab*—'people of the book'—having direct connection with the history, tradition, and theology of Islam.

3.3. The Need for Muslim Children's Literature

Development of Muslim Children's Literature is essential because of the diverse and multicultural Canadian classrooms that are a common reality today. In the context of globalization and fast-changing demographics, including the diverse immigrant and increasing Muslim population⁴ in North America, it is a moral imperative for teachers and researchers to access and engage with such materials. This need can be further substantiated through Saeeda Shah's (2014) account of the need for private Muslim

⁴ The population of Muslims in Canada is approximately one million, which is 2.8% of the total Canadian population, predicted to triple in twenty years (Lewis 2011).

educational institutions in Britain: Muslim parents and students experience a sense of exclusion in public schools; Muslims want to nurture their faith-based identity as responsible citizens; and finally, there is a need to battle Islamophobia and racism against Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11.

Islam is one of the major faith traditions of the world. Together with the two other Abrahamic faith traditions of Christianity and Judaism, the three make up approximately half the world's population (Bunge 2002) and share common histories. Lack of representational curricular materials gives rise to ignorance regarding large Muslim populations present in the schools. It marginalizes such students, resulting in them following the popular tropes offered by the educators in the classroom and exposure to the prevalent media outside the classrooms. Such an order defeats a balanced approach to teacher development programs too. For lack of such materials, teachers are left with almost negligible knowledge, skills, and aptitudes regarding teaching and connecting with Muslim and other minority students.

There is a need to create awareness in the teaching–learning processes regarding the significance of the Quran and *hadith*, historical contributions of Muslims, and Muslim ethics, as well as social behaviors so that these can be used to engage and inform the children. The absence of such classroom resources and lack of wherewithal from the teachers to handle the cultural nuances of Muslim civilizations and societies may lead to “a pedagogy that commits to making children receptive and docile, and is also one that denies human dignity and freedom” (Kincheloe 2004, p. 98). Critical engagement with such materials is fundamental to oppose the simplistic attitude of taking knowledge at its face value.

4. Defining Muslim Children's Literature

4.1. What Is Children's Literature?

Children's literature carries the knowledge that is cultural, politically, and socially constituted through texts, such that they hold ‘socializing power’, communicate cultural elements, and promote models of social action amongst younger populations (Apol 1998; Nodelman and Reimer 1996). This literature carries narratives foundational for psychological and traditional values of every society that provide an intellectual and symbolic framework through which children can integrate experience and perception (Kline 1993).

Children's literature, like the concept of childhood, is a cultural construct, and has evolved over the period of time. The way society perceives childhood is what constitutes the gist of subject matter prevalent in juvenile books. It includes a variety of genres such as fiction, nonfiction, traditional literature, drama, storybooks, picture books, poems, novels, comics, talking books, e-books, and others. Contemporary publications for children's literature mark it by its genre, age level, as well as visual, verbal, and stylistic components.

4.2. What Is Muslim Children's Literature?

The challenge of arriving at an understanding of what constitutes Muslim Children's Literature can be situated within the questions of defining children's literature. Broadly, it can be appreciated as children's literature that has at its core expressions of Muslim children, their cultures, civilizations, beliefs, and practices through fictional settings and imaginations. In such works, Muslim content is central. My perception of the category of Muslim Children's Literature is not that of books having faith-based substance, but those that substantially include literary and aesthetic fictional expressions of universal nature. It is drawn on the lines of children's literature.

The idea of children's literature can be best comprehended when situated within the context of the concept of a child in the respective society and culture. This also applies to Muslim Children's Literature. It may or may not be authored by Muslim writers, but those penned by non-Muslim creators may be an interesting category, as it would present an outsider's perspective. A concerted effort is required to develop this genre for teachers, students, and general populations to be better informed, as well as acquire aesthetic and literary insights into Muslim lives.

Muslim Children's Literature holds the potential to serve as a vehicle to discuss and promote Islamic identity, values, and ways of living. Depiction of diversity of Muslim *Ummah* through literature may promote informed debate on what is 'definitely Islamic' (Memon 2011, p. 293). Muslim Children's Literature offers a range of openness to flip the monolithic perception of Islam. The issue of identity crises, particularly in the Muslim youth in the West (Cristillo 2009), can be addressed through this literature. Such writings have the potential to provide creative venting as a response to 9/11 backlash that Muslim youth confronted. Additionally, they can provide a much needed voice for them to express their core ideals and values to the world.

In order to better appreciate the proposed genre of Muslim Children's Literature, in the following section I provide a brief understanding of what constitutes the identity and perceptions of a Muslim child.

4.3. Who Is a Muslim Child?

Childhood is a social construct (Aries 1962; Bisht 2008; Burr 2003) that historically varies across cultures. A general understanding of the basic tenets of faith followed by the Muslims and their cultural manifestations offers vistas into the granular subjectivities of a Muslim child. Understandably, the latter may be neither exhaustive nor all-inclusive of Muslim realities around the globe coexisting in various permutations and amputations. The concept of a child, besides being rooted in the contextual culture, also emanates from the traditional Muslim literature. Islam's second Caliph Umar Ibn al-Khattab is said to have addressed parents, saying, "Consider the mindset of your children when you talk to them, for surely they were born in a time very different from yours" (Moosa 2002, p. 293). This view offers glimpse into an understanding of the Muslim child, although such examples of empathy are very few.

The Holy Quran is the foremost source from where every aspect of Muslim life is derived. There are several terms used for children in the Quran, such as *dhurriyya*, *ibn*, *walad*, *janin*, *tifl*, *saghir*, *sabiyy*, *ghulam*, *habab*, *tamyiz*, *farat*, (Fass 2004) and others. Based on Quranic injunctions, childhood is considered a special period in an individual's life. As the context and milieu of the Quran are the medieval society, as was the prevalent norm, there was no distinction between an adult and a child. The most powerful Islamic icon, Prophet Muhammad, is presented as very kind and respectful to children, particularly upholding the honor and status of a girl child (Watt 1961). The advent of a child is considered a blessing for Muslims and supports the main function of marriages: that of procreation (Fass 2004). Interestingly, while traditional and folklore literature in Islam like *The Arabian Nights* have been capitalized as children's literature, theories and understanding of the notion of a child in Islam is really not available in scholarship. This lack of engagement perhaps also accounts for the underrepresentation of Muslim children.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child defines a child as an individual who has not attained the age of 18 years (Bisht 2008; Sikdar 2012). Interwoven within this is an understanding of children as a 'minority social group' (Mayall 2002) surrounded by controlling forces of power at school and home, leading to their marginalization and subordination, as well as making them vulnerable, considering them immature, innocent, and weak in negotiation powers (Bisht 2008). The intensity of this predicament is doubled by the current appreciation of the notion of a child as being predominantly centered around the Eurocentric discourses (Raman 2000) that originated after Rousseau's demarcation of childhood as a distinct period with clear boundaries (Arbuthnot 1964). These ideas echo Western notions of individualism and value of the self as autonomous (Geertz 1984). Such an understanding may not be common in the non-secular social undercurrents coexisting within the larger repertoire of educational literature surrounding children. Therefore, while the essential precincts of the notion of a child aligns with a Muslim child paradigmatically, the situation of a Muslim child in the Canadian classrooms may vary substantially, owing to a difference in the cultural worldviews of the latter. Thus, for a Muslim child, within the challenges of having an identity that is entirely based on the perceptions of adults also lies the difficulty of being understood and accepted as a 'different' minority.

A Muslim child is brought up with the basic tenets of Islam, liberally influenced by the culture in which she lives for its practical manifestations, as well as by forces at home. The position of such a child is unique and vulnerable because of the child's constant confrontation with the secular outlook, the forces of modernity (Taylor 1991) around the teaching–learning processes, the popular image of Muslims especially after 9/11, teachers having little awareness of Muslim cultures when dealing with such children (Niyozov and Pluim 2009), and lack of appropriate curriculum resources for addressing a Muslim child's needs.

Additionally, the majority of Muslims around the world are amongst the poorest, most marginalized, and the least formally educated (Abbas 2005). Muslim children also share this burden of socioeconomic status. The processes of Westernization, colonization, secularization, and globalization have created unprecedented pressures on the identity and understanding of a Muslim child. The challenges of addressing the differentiated needs of the Muslim child are aggravated by schools and teachers failing to understand and respond to racism, Islamophobia, low expectations of Muslim students, and a general lack of knowledge, as well as insensitivity towards Muslim culture and religion (Niyozov and Pluim 2009). The prevailing White, Western, and Christian dominated educational conversations, coupled with lack of relevant components in teacher education, lead to misguided perceptions of a Muslim child, who is constantly challenged to measure up with the dominant culture to the detriment of his or her culture, parents, and religion (Shatara 2007). In such a scenario, the perspective of a Muslim child is marginalized.

4.4. *Understanding a Muslim Child through Islam, Culture, and Context*

To understand a Muslim child, it is essential to understand the broad and basic components of the faith of Islam and the unique cultural as well as contextual milieus of which such a child is part. Outlined below is a glimpse into some of these constituents.

The Muslims in North America have endeavored to build bridges with the Judeo-Christian commonalities that Islam shares with the majority populations. At the same time, Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf expresses: “Many Muslims feel in this country like the Christians did in Rome when they were fed to the lions. And here the lions are the media (PBS.Org. 2002, March)”. It is difficult to define who Muslims are because of the vast Muslim diversity that cannot be fitted into one particular mold. The diverse Muslim Canadians are patriotic and believe in the “Canadian mosaic”. They represent global Muslim diversity in different ways, while also negotiating and navigating their Canadian as well as Muslim identities. For instance, veiled Muslim women have expressed concern of being stereotyped by their own fellow Muslims (Canadian Living 2017).

Muslims follow Islam, the principal tenets of which are surrender, faith, and spiritual beauty (Nasr 2004). Islam believes in One God and acknowledges all the prophets of the Abrahamic traditions. It acknowledges the underlying unity behind the multiplicity of revelations and the universal ethical premises accompanying it. For instance, men and women are not perceived as binaries. They are created from the same source. In this way, the gender understanding within Islam is inclusive⁵ (The Quran, 4:1). There is a natural harmony and balance in the creation, as God created all things in correct proportion.

The wide spectrum of Islam includes Sunnism, Shi'ism, Sufism, and various traditional, modernist, as well as fundamentalist interpretations, depicting religious pluralism and opposing a monolithic image that is popularly associated with it. The demographics of Islam consist of a majority, about 87%, Sunni population. The cultural diversity of the Muslim world can be witnessed through six major cultural zones in Islamic civilizations that are Arabic, Persian, Black African, Turkic, of the Indian

⁵ O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from one soul and created from it its mate and dispersed from both of them many men and women. And fear Allah, through whom you ask one another, and the wombs. Indeed Allah is ever, over you, an Observer (The Quran, 4:1).

subcontinent, as well as South East Asian. All these zones represent a variety of linguistic, ethnic, cultural, ritualistic, geographical, historical, and indigenous flavors.

The loaded diversity within Islam is very often undermined through popular discourses having postcolonial and orientalist underpinnings. This diversity is bound by an underlying unity through tenants such as the doctrine of *Tawhid* or unity of Allah, recitation of the Quran in Arabic, offerings of daily prayers in the direction of Mecca, following the model of the Prophet and *Shariah* (law), Sufi spirituality, and the beauty of Islamic arts. The omnipresence of God underlies the spiritual understanding of a Muslim. The social nature of a human being is part of the wisdom of God's creation. Additionally, the spirituality of God is all pervading and universal. Islam also believes in the afterlife.

Further, in Islam, the interrelationship between God, the individual, and human society at large can be presented graphically (Nasr 2004) through the means of a series of concentric circles. The innermost circle stands for the relationship between the individual and God, followed by the circles of family, the quarter of the city or town where one lives, nation, Islamic community, and finally the entirety of humanity, as well as creation as a whole. Each circle has its center in the first circle, and all transactions in subsequent circles are based on the relationship between the individual and God. In conjunction with these interrelationships, there are a set of responsibilities each person is supposed to perform, starting with one's own self, followed by duty towards the society and the family. The individualistic perspective regarding the human body in the West that proclaims the human body as entirely one's own and at one's disposal is not part of the Islamic belief system. Significantly, in the traditional Islamic worldview, every necessity of life, including earning one's daily bread, is sanctified (Nasr 2004).

The basic tenets of Muslim identity do not necessarily include secularization of the West. Freedom is a value only so far as it does not hinder one's belief and practice of faith. If it does, it results in considerable tension, particularly within the younger generations in the Western context. The primary respect by a human being is towards God, and every Muslim believer is expected to be committed to carrying out the will of God on this earth.

5. A Brief Overview of Select Available Muslim Children's Literature

As maintained in the present article, there is limited repertoire of Muslim Children's Literature that can be used for classroom and teacher development efforts. There are some books accessible for children and young adults that have Muslim characters, cultures, and themes ranging from an understanding of religion, beliefs, practices, celebrations, and aspects and struggles of daily living. Some of these also suggest a segment of diasporic writing, whereby Muslim content represents refugees, migrants, guest workers, expatriates, the exiled, and the self-exiled.

The available fictional literature that has the potential to be used as classroom resources can be broadly segmented into three types: (1) stories from the Quran and the life of Prophets, (2) traditional and historical stories, as well as (3) popular Muslim folklore and the fictional literature. In the following sections, I briefly mention some of the available resources as a glimpse into the subjects and themes of such available literature.

5.1. Stories from the Quran and the Life of Prophets

The Quran is the foundational source and an inspiration for the development of the majority of Muslim literature. Quranic (Khan 2002, 2008, 2009) and the prophetic stories are a staple for Muslim children all over the world. Many such stories are popularly retold to convey important messages (Al-Gailani and Smith 2002; Aygun 2002) related to Islam. These stories also include those told by the Prophet himself like *The King, the Boy, and the Sorcerer* (1997) and those directly retold from the Quran, including *Al-Khidr, the Green One: At the Place Where the Two Seas Meet and the Hidden Treasure of Mercy of Allah* (2000); *Goodnight Stories from the Lives of Sahabah* (2013); *Goodnight Stories from the Life of the Prophet Muhammad* (2006); *My First Quran Storybook* (2014); and *My Quran Friends Storybook* (2006), to name a few. These stories may be taught in public schools for their historical, cultural, as well as literary value.

and not in the spirit of using them as faith-based narratives. Such literary engagement can be aimed at instilling understanding, tolerance, and respect for a cosmopolitan ethic.

5.2. Traditional, Historical Stories and Popular Folklore

There are some literary pieces with which the Muslim world is identified. These works can be chosen to lead teaching and learning from familiar to unfamiliar, as well as to break stereotypes and the commodification of a certain people as a whole. In this regard, the worldwide popularity of *The Thousand and One Nights* as literature representing Muslims is unprecedented. This single most popular work is widely recognized, used, translated, and interpreted variously as a work of entertainment as well as education. Also known as *Arabian Nights* (Payne 1901), it has been one of the all-time favorite stories from the Muslim world. Its popularity, from the classical literary sources to those of the Disney versions, has been unmatched. Different retellings of these stories in various historical periods all over the world have not only lulled and amazed the readers, but have also continuously served as the repository of Muslim cultures, societies, and civilizations. *Tales from the Arabian Nights* (1985), *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (McVitty 1989), *The Shadow Spinner* (1999), and *Wishing Moon* (2004) are some interesting examples from this collection. These stories reflect the life and attitudes of medieval Arabs and reinforce the colorful as well as exotic images of the culture.

The magical tales of *Arabian Nights* deserve to be as well-known as *Grimm's Fairy Tales* but should be balanced with works that portray the modern Arab experience (Hayden 1992), which may be difficult to find. The *Arabian Nights* also perpetuate stereotypes and fuel medieval values as well as images. The stereo typing of all Muslims being Arabs and belonging to the medieval times is deeply rooted in the general psyche. For instance, in *A Place for Us*, Amar, a grade seven Muslim boy whose family is originally from India, is bullied in his school in California by his classmates Grant, Mark, and Brandon post 9/11: "... terrorist in a white shirt ... why don't you go back to your own country? ... Arabian Nights tells us he's from here ... " (Mirza 2018, pp. 111–12). In Amar's case, the predicament is doubly intense, as the contemporary images of Muslims as terrorists is also added to the already existing stereotypes.

5.3. Fictional Literature

Numerous literary resources with Muslim themes such as novels, short stories, children's stories, picture books, and famous Muslim folklores are retold within the contemporary context. Present here are samples from Muslim Children's Literature that are fictional, imaginative, and literary. Engagement with such texts is different from the non-literary texts (Quinn 1992). Its primary purpose is not necessarily dissemination of information, but rather sharing of experiences between the author and the reader within the context of feelings and attitudes invoked through its content, thus sparking the readers' imagination (Frye 1970, p. 46). These works of fiction are the closest or best fit for the proposed genre of Muslim Children's Literature. The artifacts that I analyze here offer room for varied presentations of Muslim diversity. They appeal to young readers with their highly creative content universalized through human values and struggles with which everyone can relate and engage. Therefore, I assert that these can be suitably used as curricular resources for elementary and secondary students.

Muslim Children's Literature with Muslim characters and cultures is generally woven around the basic tenets of Islam (Ghazi and Ghazi 1992). It teaches universal messages and values of patience, compassion, love, sacrifice, charity, kindness (Khurram 1983; Norridge 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2007a, 2007b), understanding, respect for everyone (EL-Magazy 2016), and tolerance. Any student in the classroom can relate to these cultural, ethical, and moral values. Some of these stories can be acted out in the classrooms as well. Further, there are stories that render understanding of Islam (Khan and Gallinger 2002), talk about Muslim history and heroes (Khattab 1996), describe Muslim festivals (Marchant 2001), and narrate tensions experienced by Muslims of settling down in the West (Wolf 2003) and the struggle to preserve their identity as well as culture (Abdel-Fattah 2005; Iqbal and Iqbal 1976; Kyuchukov

and Eitzen 2004; Morris 2003). Touching stories about human life and relationships transcend all the boundaries of religion, politics, history, and geography, such as *Grandfather's Orchard* (Ghazi 1993) and *The Hundredth Name* (Oppenheim 1995). They also offer insight into Muslim ways of life and cultural value systems attached to their beliefs and practices. Significantly, Canadian writer Deborah Ellis' multi-award-winning young adult novel *Moon at nine* (Ellis 2014) deals with the lesbian relationships of two teenage Muslim girls.

Stories of Ramadan (El-Moslimany 1994; Hoyt-Goldsmith 2001; Mathews 1996; Zucker 2004) and *Eid* (Akhtar 2000; Gilani-Williams 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, 2010; Hughes 2003; Jones-Bey 1996; Khan 2005; Zucker 2004) play a very important role in Muslim Children's Literature. They form the popular repertoire of holiday literature for Muslim children. They also support the universal identity of Muslim children, all of whom, no matter their historical, geographical, political, or cultural background, associate with the festivities of Eids. Muslim cultures and societies reflected in these works offer educational opportunities into the cultures of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Iran, Israel, Palestine, Morocco, the Arab world, and others. Many stories mentioned here do not directly deal in depth with how Muslim characters' identity markers such as fasting and following Islam make them better people or help them recognize inequity and injustice. Submission and meek following of the given cultural and religious traditions are the trends seen in almost all of them except a few.

The following subsections provide in-depth insight into two artifacts: a young adult novel and a picture book, covering the age range of elementary and secondary students. They have both internal and external landscapes that signify a Muslim identity and way of life in different shades. These pieces can be easily brought into classroom and teacher training discourses.

I chose these two books because of their aesthetic appeal in terms of story, characters, landscape, and picture quality, the latter particularly of *Moon Watchers*. Both the works are authored by American writers depicting female lead characters in search of Muslim identity. The authors of these books are Muslims living in the United States bringing experiences of their Iranian and Palestinian background to the books.

5.4. Being Muslim

5.4.1. Dilemmas of Growing up: *Habibi* (1997)

Gross and Gamal (2014) describe how Muslim Arab-Israeli teachers conceptualize the Israeli–Arab conflict with their students within the tensions of belonging and identity. I believe books like *Habibi*, which is narrated from the point of view of an Arab-American teenage girl Liyana Abboud, can provide a good scaffold to initiate relevant conversations in the classrooms.

Habibi portrays interesting accounts of the cultural, geographical, and emotional landscapes of two very different worlds that the Abbouds occupy and oscillate in. It depicts the journey of Liyana's struggle to come to terms with multiple identities in a sociocultural context to which she is completely alien. She is torn, as she knows very little about her Arab heritage, when her Palestinian father and Christian mother decide to return to Jerusalem from the USA to 'give back' to their motherland and be in the holy land to bring up their teenage children in their own culture. Later, Liyana has amicable solutions to offer to even the most difficult things in life.

The book presents some critical messages to young readers on politics of difference, religion, and hatred. Liyana thinks: "Isn't it dumb to want only to be next to people who are like you?" (Nye 1997, p. 27) Further, "The worst foolish thing is when a religion wants you to say it's the only right one. Or the best one" (Nye 1997, p. 169). Liyana's musings offer insight into identity dilemmas that young adolescents face in the current multicultural, mobile world. They present a very interesting perspective on young readers' ways of negotiating individuality and spaces. Liyana's reconciliation at the end is a sign of the potential that cosmopolitan ethics hold for an educational and informed understanding of multiple identities. The intelligent triangulation of American, Arab-Palestinian, and Judeo-Christian values convey one kind of solution needed for a robust assimilation of Muslims

within their selves. The book is critiqued for its predictable plot. It does not concretely propose any resolution to the Arab–Israel conflict, but offers a humanist lens of accepting and celebrating differences.

5.4.2. Ramadan and Eid: Moon Watchers: *Shirin's Ramadan Miracle* (2010)

Moon Watchers: Shirin's Ramadan Miracle (Jalali 2010) is a picture book by Reza Jalali on *Ramadan* and *Eid* narrated from the point of view of a nine-year-old girl, Shirin. It is a holiday picture book portraying a Muslim holiday in an American context. Shirin lives with her family in Maine, United States of America. Her family constitutes her parents, her older brother Ali, their cat Pishi, and her grandmother 'Maman Bozorg', which literally means 'the elderly one'.

Shirin watches the moon with her father when *Ramadan* is about to start. She observes the waxing and waning of it throughout the month until the *Eid* is announced. Her experiences of watching Ramadan moon with her father are memorable. The plot of the story revolves around Shirin, who desires to observe fast during *Ramadan*: "Shirin, you're too young, but remember there's more to *Ramadan* than fasting. Why do not you think of some good deeds to help others in our family? You could take care of Pishi or weed in the garden". Maman Bozorg tells Shirin the story of a boy who fasted part time, and his offering was also accepted. Shirin is curious to know if her part-time offering would be accepted or not: "Of course, Allah would like such an offering! ... your part-time fasting would be beautiful and precious—the way quilt is beautiful—all different pieces becoming one gift".

During the course of the month-long fasting, Shirin discovers that her brother is cheating on his fast. Shirin has been taught by her parents that *Ramadan* just doesn't mean fasting and staying away from food. It also means doing good. While Shirin is struggling to pick up something meaningful and challenging for doing good, she catches her brother, Ali, cheating in *Ramadan*. Ali knows Shirin is aware of the truth. Shirin does not tell on him, and it is a miracle for her as she learns to keep others' secrets and do good deeds. She has grown up this *Ramadan* and gets a gift from her elder brother. *Ramadan* for Shirin brings the reward of an improved relationship with her brother.

The Muslim culture in this story is depicted through the traditional Persian style food, the dressing, the chadors, prayers, henna hand painting, and the observation of *Ramadan* rituals. The grandmother and dad educate the children on *Ramadan* values. For instance, Shirin is learning to follow prayer actions through the observation of her family praying in a ritualistic way. After prayers, Dad advises Shirin to ask something from Allah: "With eyes shut, I pray for straighter hair and better grades." This is a very realistic portrayal of a nine-year-old Muslim American child. She also learns from her mom that "... not every Muslim woman covers her hair." The mother's fatigue and headaches for lack of tea, as well as the father's low energy, bring forth realistic aspects of the rituals and practices. All this makes fasting more humane.

Moon Watchers is a little more unusual than the other *Ramadan* and *Eid* stories. It has the approval of elders for children to fast, as long as they wish to, when they are young. It is alright for them to offer a mosaic of a gift in bits and pieces to make a complete carpet. In my discussion of the story with the two female Muslim authors that I had interviewed earlier, both the authors were appalled by such a twist in the story that allows children to observe a truncated fast. They considered it as a gross misrepresentation of Islam.

The book vividly portrays beauty in Islam through a general artistic approach to storytelling. The pictures in the book are aesthetically done to attract children and give readers a sense of pleasure. The approach to fasting and *Ramadan* represents a different voice and a diverse perspective within the repertoire of *Ramadan* books. The connected activities in the story are a reaffirmation of Muslim identities and milieu. The author has created a portrait of a close-knit Muslim family through Shirin's family during *Ramadan* with an attempt to normalize it. Significantly, there are no Arabic words used in the book, yet another way of propagating that it is normal to deviate from the popular norms of being Muslim. The story is reflective of contemporary multicultural American lives.

5.4.3. Discussion

As mentioned above, I particularly chose texts for critical content analysis that are inclusive, relevant, and iconoclastic in some ways, as they represent rather non-stereotypical aspects of Muslim lives. At the same time, there is room for unpacking multilevel complexities. The exploration of the texts above is also aimed at creating empathy in the educational stakeholders about the negligence and comparative absence of Muslim Children's Literature in curriculums. Such discussions, when conducted inside classrooms, have the potential to create healthy spaces for Muslim and minority children in order to bring them from the margins to the center.

Habibi is penned in the backdrop of Arab–Israeli conflict, having intertextuality with the social, political, and cultural contexts of the United States, Israel, and Jerusalem, as well as Muslim identity within a multifaith family. Liyana's modern Arab-American experiences hold compound layers of identities to negotiate, from sociohistorical to personal American. Added complexity in the story is witnessed through depiction of a multifaith American family in which the father and teenage kids identify themselves as Muslims.

The *Moon Watchers* is a narrative wherein the little girl muses on 'to fast or not to fast', and her family attempts to normalize deviations from the norm. In this story, the Muslim American family negotiates identity in different ways like doing good, being obedient, and not lying or cheating. The intertextuality with observation of Ramadan, Muslim ways of life, and ethical dilemmas are touchpoints for classroom discussion on Muslim holidays. The story also breaks the stereotype of all Muslims being Arabs and all Muslim women wearing hijab. In fact, in a bold hermeneutic interpretation, it asserts the human side of fasting: sometimes cheating half way and at others breaking fast early or finding different ways of earning piety. It is also a deviation from general depiction of Eid celebrations that are almost a replica of birthday or any other parties.

While the backgrounds of both these girl protagonists, Liyana and Shirin, are very different, as Muslims they are expected to be 'good' Muslims and are left to navigate questions of 'being Muslim' through different dilemmas. They do not have the freedom to choose ways of being as perhaps the young girl Marjane has in *Persepolis* (2007). In both the works discussed above, the solutions to the problems are rather romanticized, nevertheless, they portray negotiations of space and identity of these girls amidst the postcolonial reality that they are confronting. Liyana resists the move to Jerusalem from America, whereas the nine-year-old Shirin ventures into asking questions about religious–cultural norms. Interestingly, both the works have focus on father–daughter relationships, which is an attempt to bring female voices to the fore.

Hopefully, the use of such resources in Canadian classrooms will provide creative insights into Muslim cultures and beliefs and will thwart the 'tourist stance' (Beach et al. 2009, p. 141) that Western children are led to dwell in, thinking that non-Western worlds are totally different from their own worlds. It also has the potential to break some of the Muslim stereotypes of being Arabs only.

6. Way Forward

A vigorous inclusion of Muslim Children's Literature as a curriculum resource of public schools, primary and secondary, offers a promise of inculcating cosmopolitan ethics in learners through dialogue, action, and presence of possibilities, which is a desirable response in leading towards transformative citizenship (Banks 2008). Cosmopolitan ethics denote the spirit of unity of all of humankind, with its diverse manifestations in the form of various cultures and societies throughout the world. Understood in this way, it promotes tolerance premised on thriving pluralist humanity (Appiah 2006). Muslim civilizations have played a critical role in the development of knowledge and the sciences, and it is about time the awareness of these is created.

I suggest the National and State curriculums to be mindful of minority representations and inclusion. In Ontario, for instance, the Trillium List can be consciously populated with resources that have robust Muslim components. The Trillium List has textbook recommendations that support teachers in identifying the books required to fulfill curriculum expectations. These textbooks and

classroom resources can be inclusive of Muslim representations other than those rooted in the Middle East, such as from the South Asian and Asia-Pacific regions, where the majority of Muslim populations live today.

Further, dialogue with the mainstream publication houses that provide templates to a culture (Kline 1993, p. 177) can be initiated for widening the publication horizons. It is important to recognize that the templates generated by publishers are generally followed by teachers and impact curriculum development efforts as well. Significantly, many publishing houses are venturing into the field of multicultural literature, and increasingly, some children's books with a high level of aesthetics, written for children as young as four, are now being translated into many languages. For instance, Naima Roberts' *The Swirling Hijab* (2002) is translated into Albanian, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Czech, Farsi, French, German, Gujarati, Italian, Panjabi, Portuguese, Pushtu, Serbo-Croatian, Somali, Spanish, Tamil, Turkish, and Urdu. Such translations can be used to complement teaching and learning in the classroom.

Muslim Children's Literature can be a powerful curricular resource to augment a broad outlook towards developing teachers that can serve inclusive classrooms in public schools. It has the capacity to build youth identity. Some of the sociocultural and geopolitical tensions existing within the Muslim world can also be roped in for an educated response within and outside classrooms through such resources. The need for Muslim Children's Literature, the present status of its availability, and sample analysis of the relevant artifacts above depict the promise that the development of such resources holds. The use of Muslim Children's Literature as a curricular resource has the power to promote the bridging of cultures, creating responsiveness around Muslim students' background, alleviating misconceptions in the students, and promoting confidence in the parents of Muslim children.

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